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ABSTRACT

The fact sheet, intended for adults and young adults with disabilities, discusses issues to consider in planning for postsecondary education. Readers are urged to assert themselves in the process of planning for and obtaining services. Guidelines for examining career options and personal needs are given as well as practical suggestions for dealing with campus accessibility and transportation features. Students are urged to avail themselves of existing support services, and if they are unavailable, to procure needed services (such as attendants, readers, and taped texts) on their own. Sources of services in the community (such as vocational rehabilitation agencies and centers for independent living) are also discussed. The growing importance of support groups is touched upon. Examples of the kinds of academic adjustments that may be made are seen to include pre-registration, flexibility in class scheduling, test modifications, and special help for students with learning disabilities. (CL)

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Higher Education and the Handicapped Resource Center—a national clearinghouse on postsecondary education for disabled people •

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MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OPPORTUNITIES!

A Guide to Postsecondary Education for Adults with Disabilities

More and more students with disabilities are taking on the challenge of postsecondary schooling, and succeeding. This guide is based on their experiences. It contains practical suggestions to assist you in managing the day-to-day challenges that may arise as you continue your education.

Postsecondary education means any education program beyond high school. It includes universities, colleges, vocational-technical schools and adult education programs. The suggestions that follow are applicable to students of all ages, whether enrolled in (or considering) a full-time academic program or a single evening course for adults; whether working toward a degree or strengthening job skills in a vocational program.

You may be in high school, thinking about the next steps after graduation. Or you may have left before graduation and now want to go on learning. You may be preparing for college or planning to enter a program to continue job preparation. Whatever type of postsecondary education program you choose (or are now enrolled in) this guide should help you find answers and resolve problems that may arise—and make the most of your opportunities.

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Express Your Needs—And Be Open To Change

Remember, you are the one who knows yourself and your needs and strengths best. It is important to learn how to explain your needs to others, and be open to new ways of doing things. Conditions won't all be just the way you want and need them. A lot will be up to you—to arrange for help, to adapt to situations and to express your needs in a reasonable way.

It's not easy to take responsibility for solving problems, for dealing effectively with others in working out accommodations, for finding your own identity in a new and unfamiliar environment. The more you do it, the more confident you'll become, and the further you'll get in achieving independence.

How Do You Plan Ahead?

- Give serious thought to your academic and career goals. What are your main interests? It helps to list them, and try to number them in order of importance to you. That way, when you start thinking about a postsecondary program, whether it's a community college, a university or a vocational-technical school, you'll have a way to decide which type of program suits you best.
- Even if you're just beginning high school, it's not too early to start getting advice. Discuss your plans and questions with your parents, friends, other people with disabilities, counselors, and professionals in your area of interest.
- Explore all the postsecondary educational possibilities available to you. Write to HEATH/Closer Look for "Education After High School—The Choice is Yours." This fact sheet describes different kinds of programs: universities, four-year colleges, community and junior colleges, a variety of vocational-technical programs and adult education. Write for catalogues and check your school or local library for information about schools that appeal to you.
- Be sure that you find out about admissions requirements of schools that interest you. You may have to take some necessary preparatory courses before you can be accepted. Try to get involved in extracurricular activities. That helps develop your interests—and is something that people may take into account when reviewing admissions.
- When you've narrowed down your choices, make an effort to meet or correspond with other disabled students who attend each school you are thinking about. Many schools have handicapped or disabled student services offices that can put you in touch with disabled students who have attended the school or are there now. If no disabled student has ever attended, you may still want to give the school a try. That's a choice that's up to you.

Know Your Own Needs

- Be aware of the accommodations and special services available. You should have a clear understanding of your own needs, so that you'll know what to look for. For instance, in doing your coursework, do you need a reading machine? Does it have to be a special kind? Is it available? Who will pay for it? Is there an alternative that will work for you, like a reader or tape recorder?
- Once you've made some decisions, write or call ahead to arrange a visit to the school (or schools) that interest you, if this is at all possible. Find out if there is a disabled student services office. Introduce yourself. The person in charge will be able to answer a lot of your questions. During your visit, you might be able to talk to other students. And you will see the situation for yourself.
- Ask questions. That's the way to get information and solve problems. Ask, too, for assistance when it's necessary. Usually people want to help, if you will only explain how they can.
- Many schools require admissions tests or student assessment. Special test-taking accommodations (such as large print copy, use of a reader, or additional time) can be made for disabled students who need them. Write for these free pamphlets: "Information for Students with Special

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Needs—Admission Testing Programs for the College Board" from ATP Services for Handicapped Students, Institutional Services, Box 592, Princeton, New Jersey 08541; and "Special Testing Guide" from ACT Assessment, Test Administration, P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, Iowa 52243. For special accommodations in taking the GED—the high school equivalency exam—contact the Adult Education Agency in your state.

What About Physical Accessibility? How Do You Get Around If Your Mobility Is Limited?

When looking into schools, check to see whether you are able to move about the campus easily and whether or not you can enter and use the necessary facilities. If you are planning to live at home, an accessible dorm room will not be important to you, but you will certainly be interested in finding out if you can get into your English classroom or the library. Not everything you need will be there. It will take patience and ingenuity to work out adaptations that will increase your mobility. Here are some ideas that can help you plan:

- An advance visit will tell you how accessible the campus is. Even though a friend with a similar disability has told you that his wheelchair doesn't fit through a particular door, your wheelchair may go through quite easily. Find out all you can. If the buildings have elevators, can you use them? Do you need a special key? Where can you obtain one? Talk with appropriate people about accommodations that are possible. For example, you might need to arrange to have rails installed in a shower. Or it may be possible to remove such obstacles as turnstiles in cafeterias, bookstores or other areas.

Look beyond the buildings. Consider the physical terrain. Is the area flat or hilly? Does it get a lot of snow or ice?

- Will you need assistance in getting acquainted with the campus and surrounding community? If so, is there a person available who can help? Many schools have orientation programs for incoming disabled students. The students with mobility problems are shown accessible routes around campus to help them manage on their own.

Other schools have specially designed maps for people with different disabilities. For example, an access map will indicate curb cuts, or accessible entrances, elevators and reserved parking facilities. A tactile map is a three dimensional map and may be written in braille or large print.

If school staff are not available to help and there are no assistive devices, you may want to ask a friend or family member to work with you in getting fully oriented. Think about asking another student—you can get acquainted with the environment and meet someone new at the same time.

- Think about your transportation needs on and off campus. Some schools have their own accessible vans. If yours does not, look into private or public transportation services that may be available in the community. Your state Vocational Rehabilitation agency may provide money for your transportation needs. Be sure to check the hours of operation of the transportation service before you schedule your classes.

- If you are a sports fan, you may want to find out if the stadium has spaces for wheelchairs. Is swimming a part of your life? Find out whether the pool has a special lift if you need one. Music and theater enthusiasts should investigate the accessibility of the auditorium or the theater.

How Do You Find Services That You Need?

There are various ways to get support services. Sometimes you can act on your own. Other times, offices in the school or groups or agencies in the community can help you. One special office that has mushroomed on college campuses and exists in other postsecondary programs is the disabled students services office. (It may have a different name in different places.) Some of the programs and services we have mentioned are often provided or coordinated by them; they are also excellent sources of information. The functions of these offices may vary, but usually include the following services:

- orientation programs
- social or recreational programs
- awareness activities to educate students and faculty about handicapping conditions
- advocacy; help with dealing with physical and attitudinal barriers
- assistance in finding devices or services of readers, notetakers, attendants, interpreters and braillers
- study centers
- counseling

If your school does not have a special student services office, or if the Dean of Students cannot currently provide you with the help you need, here are some ideas of things you can do yourself:

- Arrange for taped texts, attendants, interpreters and other services well before the semester begins. Ask for required reading lists for your courses with ample lead time to arrange for taping, so that you are prepared for classes. Having a book taped or locating a personal aid that meets your needs might be done in six weeks, but may take as long as four to six months.

- Check on the availability of readers, if you need them. A free reader service may be offered through a community agency. Or the work-study program at your school may provide this kind of employment opportunity for students receiving financial aid. You may even want to suggest this possibility to the coordinator of disabled student services, Dean of Students, or the financial aid officer. They might be receptive to ideas of ways to work together.

- If you need an attendant, and the school does not maintain a list of attendants, try putting a notice on a bulletin board in the central office building or student center. Advertising in the school newspaper may help. Allied health, nursing or other departments in the school, such as the Physical Therapy Department, may be a good source. Some PT programs even give their students academic credit for participating in a meaningful learning experience of this kind. Be sure you understand who will pay the attendant. Will the school pay some, will you be paying the full amount, or will an agency such as State Vocational Rehabilitation provide for the service?

• You know what equipment and aids you have used in the past that have worked best for you, and helped you with your studies. Do you plan to bring them to school or does the disabled student services office provide such items as braillers, tape recorders, talking calculators, etc.? If you can't supply them and the school doesn't provide them, try contacting community agencies such as the Easter Seal Society or Commission for the Blind in your state. Local service clubs—the Rotary, Kiwanis or the Lions Clubs—may also be good sources for assistance.

• Talk to other students in your classes about special kinds of help you need. For instance, a friend may be willing to tutor you before an exam. You may be able to think of something you can do in return.

• Let your instructors know about your special needs. This is extremely important. For example, if you have a hearing impairment, you might arrange with the instructor to see lecture notes ahead of time, so that you are somewhat familiar with the material and can concentrate more on visual feedback. You should let the teacher know, too, that you need to sit up front in the classroom and that there should be good lighting on the faces of the speaker and interpreter (if you use one).

Look For Services In the Community

Many other kinds of services are frequently available to help you succeed in school. Find out all you can about the groups and organizations that have been set up to help you. Many of them are outstanding. Here are some examples:

• You may be eligible to receive services from your local Vocational Rehabilitation agency. These are public agencies, set up in each state to assist eligible disabled people with services they need to become employable. In order to be eligible, a person must have a physical or mental handicap which causes a significant barrier to employment, and must be able to benefit from Vocational Rehabilitation services.

These services will vary from state to state. Voc Rehab might carry the cost of special equipment, readers, interpreters and other important aids. In some cases, the agency may provide full or partial funding for tuition and other educational expenses. You should be in touch with a Voc Rehab counselor during high school, or soon after a disabling condition occurs when you begin to plan for your postsecondary education. If you are eligible, the counselor should also work closely with the financial aid officer at the institution you will be attending to discuss plans and work out a way to share costs.

• There may be a Center for Independent Living (CIL) in the nearby community. CILs are usually excellent sources of help; services are provided by people who are disabled themselves and are concerned about helping you be more independent. They may:

— help find accessible housing
— provide a pre-screened list of attendants
— offer counseling on problems of independent living
— work to make the community more accessible

For a partial list of CILs, write to: Clearinghouse for the Handicapped, U.S. Department of Education, Room 3106, Switzer Building, 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20202. The Independent Living Research Utilization Project (P.O. Box 20095, Houston, Texas 77025) maintains a national computerized list of independent living programs and their services. Be aware that others might exist that are not on these lists. Ask around. Other disabled people may help you find one. If you are going to be away from home for the first time, a CIL may be especially helpful.

Support Groups Are Growing

Disabled student support groups are appearing at more and more schools. They're attracting a greater number of students and are helping to make important changes on campuses throughout the country. A disabled student organization can provide you with the opportunity to meet students who may have similar concerns to share ideas on ways to make needed improvements on your campus. It may also help you find solutions to your individual problems.

The activities of these groups vary in different places, depending on the concerns, needs, ingenuity and commitment of the members. Some groups publish their own newspapers; others have sponsored "awareness days"; some provide peer-counseling, tutoring, social and recreational activities; certain groups have worked successfully to bring about structural changes at the schools.

If your school does not have such a group, you may want to talk to other disabled students about starting one. There are some national student organizations that may be of help. Write for a free copy of "Student Connections," available from the HEATH/Closer Look Resource Center. "Student Connections" lists organizations of students and associations that are concerned with the needs of disabled students in postsecondary education.

Get as involved in student life as you can. Your activities outside of the classroom can be as important and rewarding to you as your academic program. Don't forget about organizations and clubs that meet your interests.

Can You Arrange For Help With Academic Work?

Since the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, disabled people and their advocates have worked hard to inform educators of ways that postsecondary programs can be adapted for disabled students who need specific modifications in order to participate. Section 504 makes clear that qualified disabled students have an equal right to postsecondary education, and its regulations specify that all programs, services and activities offered to nondisabled students must be available to the disabled student population as well.

Since this law is now well-known, your teachers may anticipate your needs, or request that you let them know if you require assistance. If not, ask if you can share with them how you manage your learning. The following are examples of the types of adjustments that may be arranged, if needed:

• Pre-registration. You can ask for help in scheduling your classes before the rush of registration day. In planning your program, allow for the time you need to get from place to place.

• Flexibility in class scheduling. Not all classrooms are likely to be fully accessible. If you register for a course that is given in a room that you cannot get to because of your disability, you should ask the registrar to have that course relocated to a room that is accessible to you. This is usually not difficult to arrange.

• Flexibility in course requirements. Some schools have a list of courses that they require students to take in order to qualify for certain degrees. If your disability absolutely prevents you from participating in a specific required course even with adaptations, you may be able to arrange to have a different class substituted for the required one. For example, a deaf student might take an art course instead of a music class that generally fulfills the fine arts requirements. Ask. If you don't, you won't find out.

• Extended time. While many postsecondary programs are often referred to as one, two, or four-year programs, you may need more time (months or years) to complete the coursework. You might want to consider extended time if you write slowly or if you have limitations in your ability to concentrate. In such cases, you might also have to ask your teachers for extra time to finish research papers or other assignments. Remember, though, that if you choose this alternative your education could become more expensive because of the additional time in school.

• Test modifications. Traditionally, tests are given in writing in a limited time period. Most teachers now are willing to adapt a test for you if your handicap requires it. You could ask to take an oral test, with questions on a tape which would also record your answers. Or, if you use a print enlarger or other reading device, you might be able to arrange extra time to complete your test.

• Notetakers. If you have difficulty writing, or listening to lectures and taking notes at the same time, try to arrange for notetakers on a regular basis. If notetakers aren't available, ask a classmate to give you a copy of his notes after class. You will probably want to provide the paper or cost of duplicating in return for the help.

• Special help for students with learning disabilities. Schools generally provide assistance to students with learning disabilities in one of three ways: Some simply allow use of recorded texts, untimed tests, notetakers, etc. Other schools have study centers where any student who needs help with math, reading or study skills can go for tutoring. But many schools are now offering comprehensive learning disabilities programs which include diagnostic testing, individualized education plans and tutoring (enhanced with audiovisual aids) by specialists in the education of students with specific learning disabilities.

If you have learning disabilities, you will have to think very seriously about what kind of academic help you need and evaluate the type of service offered at schools you are considering. (Write for the HEATH/Closer Look fact sheet, "The Learning Disabled Adult and Postsecondary Education.")

The suggestions listed here are only a few of the things you can do to manage the various demands that confront you, and to make participation in a postsecondary program not only possible—but truly rewarding. Every student discovers his or her own individual ways of dealing with problems and overcoming obstacles. When these ideas are shared, other people benefit. Don't keep yours to yourself! Let your fellow students know, and let us know how *you* are meeting the challenge of postsecondary education.

Text by Susan J. Sorrells, Lois Hertz and Maxine Krulwich, December 1981

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